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# Community as Agency: Community Partner Experiences with Service Learning

Paula Gerstenblatt

## Abstract

The bulk of research on service learning has focused on student outcomes; however, there is a scarcity of research examining the lived experiences of community partners. Additionally, the few studies that exist to date involve agencies and have not included informal networks and civically active citizens. This study consisted of interviews with nine community partners, a combination of agency employees, and active citizens. All of the partners resided in a rural Southern town that worked with a network of service-learning classes on a variety of community-identified projects. The current study supports the contribution of service learning to communities, the importance of investing in reciprocal relationships, and the value added of including community partners who are members of informal networks and civically active residents. Recommendations for further research and strategies to support reciprocal and meaningful community engagement are discussed.

Service learning and its core principles of study, reciprocity, and reflection has gained prominence in higher education as a signature pedagogy that places equal value on mutually beneficial outcomes for students and community partners. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999; Harkavy, 2004). Service learning is one of the most valuable ways to support community-university partnerships and requires an investment in relationship building as part of collaborative problem solving (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). The bulk of research on service learning has focused on student outcomes, with little attention given to the communities with which they work (Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010). Additionally, existing research on community partners does not include the perspective of informal networks or individual residents involved with service-learning students (Cress et al., 2010; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, Campbell, Rosenblatt, Geschwind, Kaganoff, Robyn, Sundt, Vogelgesang, & Klein, 1998; Littlepage, Gazley, & Bennett, 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006). To address this gap in the literature, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to examine the experience of community members who worked with students on a variety of service-learning projects in a rural community.

The lived experiences of community members involved with service-learning students

can assist in the further development of best practices that support mutually beneficial community-university partnerships. The research question that guided the study was: What was the lived experience of community members working with university service-learning classes? Phenomenology is a method that seeks to understand the meaning and essence of a phenomenon (Grbich, 2007). Therefore, this method is well suited to a study investigating the common experience of community members who worked with university students on projects to improve the conditions of their town.

## Background

Very few empirical studies have focused on the impact of service learning on community outcomes or the identified community partner (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Research done to date indicates positive outcomes for the agencies involved with service programs; however, the literature is scant and dated and does not include informal networks or individual civically active citizens. Driscoll et al. (1996) conducted a comprehensive case study of four service-learning classes at Portland State University that used both qualitative and quantitative methods including surveys, interviews, and focus groups with community partners. As a result of participation in service-learning programs, community agencies perceived a positive effect on their capacity to serve clients, felt they had

received economic and social benefits, and were satisfied with student interactions.

Sandy and Holland (2006) conducted a qualitative study of focus groups with 99 community partners across eight California campuses. Partners discussed their perceptions regarding benefits to the academic institutions, the organization's impact on student learning, and ways to improve the partnership. Community agencies identified ways that service-learning students contributed to client outcomes and the increased capacity of the agency to take on new projects. The community partners also expressed a dedication to student learning as a reason for their participation with service-learning classes (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

In a quantitative study, Littlepage et al. (2012) surveyed non-profit and religious agencies in two Indiana counties to learn about the ways community agencies use volunteer management tools and how they differentiate various forms of student involvement, including service learning. Service-learning students required more agency time than other volunteers because of the expectation of reciprocal benefits to students and the agency; however, they also reported the students brought other benefits such as increased visibility and client outcomes. Results also showed a willingness to continue to work with service-learning students (Littlepage et al., 2012). Similarly, in a mixed methods study by Gray et al. (1998), a majority of community organizations gave high marks to student volunteers and felt the benefits of working with students outweighed the costs.

One critique of service learning has been that the benefits to students outweigh those of the community (Beran & Lubin, 2012; Butin, 2010). Yet, research engaging the experiences of community partners working with service-learning students is scarce. This study addresses gaps in the literature by investigating the lived experiences of community partners that included both agency staff and individual residents who worked with university students.

## **Methods**

The interviews were conducted with community members who partnered with university students on a variety of projects. In this study I was a participant observer, co-instructor of one of the service-learning courses, the founder and director of a community

development initiative, and family member by marriage to several extended family members residing in the town. Located two hours away from our campus, the rural community has an estimated median household income of \$32,000, a per capita income of \$15,050, with 21% of the residents' income below the poverty level. District wide, 74% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged and 39.8% of children under 18 are living below the federal poverty level. While many residents contend with poverty and unemployment concerns, the African American neighborhood, still referred to as "black folk's town," has suffered the consequence of the economic decline more severely. The legacy of segregation is evident in the lack of African American representation in city government, community boards, businesses, and the school district where there are no African American teachers or administrators. In addition to the overall economic decline, there are few civic, cultural, or recreational engagement opportunities for youth and residents other than a variety of sports events. Youth centers and programs that provide social or recreational activities for young people are largely absent. Similarly, the elderly lack crucial support services, and there is no public transportation to the nearest major city 20 miles away.

The network of courses included electives in social work, writing and rhetoric, and art at a major university. Over a two-year period approximately 130 students from a range of disciplines worked in the town including social work, psychology, English, government, film, theater, engineering, political science, architecture, and art. Projects included a campaign to restore a historical building, a community garden, supporting an art co-op, a high school essay workshop, a teen social support group, writing a National Endowment of the Arts grant, a youth art exhibit, a public transportation project, establishing a subcommittee with residents and the City Council, an oral history project, design mapping projects, multimedia documentaries, public art projects, and a cultural enrichment program for young African American girls. Students worked with the library board, school district, churches, local artists, civically involved residents, and the African American Prince Hall Masons.

Interviews were conducted over a 4-month period. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected as a method of analysis to gain descriptions

of the lived experience of the community members working with a steady stream of university students – a first time experience for the town. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretive role of the researcher. To address this, researchers are expected to contextualize the factors that influence their interpretations through a candid and rigorous process that includes descriptive audit trails, documenting assumptions and relevant experiences, peer readers, and extensive interviewing (Grbich, 2007). Having multiple roles in this project and town, adhering to these procedures in a transparent manner was important to maintain integrity. Phenomenology provides a rich and descriptive source of data and is well suited to better understand the meaning of the experiences of community members through their words and descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological inquiry helps researchers gain understanding of the essential meaning of lived experiences from participants' perspective and descriptions; therefore, this method was employed in this study.

### *Participants*

Criterion sampling was used in this study. The criterion was residency in the town and involvement with university students in at least one project over the course of one semester ( $n=9$ ). Community partners worked with students on a variety of projects, often more than one at a time, and for more than one semester. The sample included the school district superintendent, high school principal, two high school teachers, a pastor/city councilman, local newspaper editor, and three civically active residents. The breakdown by gender and ethnicity was 67% female, 33% male, 56% white, and 44% African American.

### *Procedure*

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to gather the community member's description of the experience of working with the university students. The questions were drawn from the literature as well as my experience as a participant observer and comprised of nine items about the community member's experience working with university students (see Table 1). I conducted the interviews, which lasted between 25–45 minutes and immediately after each interview I wrote field notes. The university Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects approved this study as part of a larger investigation of the im-

**Table 1.** Interview Schedule

<b>Community Project INTERVIEW GUIDE</b>	
1.	Tell me a little about yourself? (age, race/ethnicity, community role, student rank).
2.	How did you come to be involved with university students working on projects in your town?
3.	Tell me about the activity/project you were involved in with the university students. What was your role in this project?
4.	How do you feel the students were received in the town?
5.	What was their contribution to the town? Do you feel their contribution extended beyond the semester?
6.	How would you describe your experience working with the university students? Do you feel as though you grew from this experience? If yes, how?
7.	How did you feel when the semester ended and the students were no longer in the town?
8.	How did working with the university students influence your thinking about your community? Did it change your perspective of your community in any way? How?
9.	How has the town been affected by the university presence in the community?
Anything else you want to share?	

pact of the community-university partnership in this town.

### *Data Analysis*

All audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Procedures associated with phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) were used in the analysis. As a participant observer, I focused on the lived experiences of community members working with students. However, my position as the founder of the community development initiative, co-instructor of the service-learning course, and family member was taken into account through the phenomenological procedures of writing assumption statements, bracketing, writing field notes throughout the analysis process, and peer review. The steps of phenomenological analysis were as follows: (1) recording a list of assumptions about the community partners and their experience working with students; (2) bracketing my experience working in the community; (3) conducting a naive reading to absorb the entirety of the data; (4) reducing and eliminating data that did not pertain to the lived experience of working with university students;

**Table 2.** Example of Significant Statements and Meaning Units

Significant Statement	Meaning Unit
Well, when we had the time to sit down and plan and really advertise what's going to happen, I think it's been a rousing success. I know these students came in late, the three that I met yesterday, but I think we have already started long range goals for next summer. I think we have got some really good ideas and we can plan in advance. I think we can do some pretty wonderful things and expose our kids to some ideas and some instruction that they would not get otherwise.	I have worked with the students to get the summer program going and plan for next year and I think we are doing really good work together that would not happen without students coming to the town.
I marvel at their resilience, so many roadblocks were thrown up, and I know in social work in general, I can't imagine how many roadblocks they will see because, you got a lot of people that want to see great things happen here, but even with that they throw up road blocks, and it's more roadblock and skepticism than anything and I have learned a lot from the resilience of these guys who come in here. I am not going to say they won't take no for an answer because that sounds negative, but they look for alternatives until they find a crack and then they get in there.	I have learned from the students and they have inspired me with their perseverance and refusal to be deterred despite obstacles.
Well, I think the summer enrichment program probably sticks out most because kids a year later talk about the video game designs, the oral history project, because it uses concepts that they are comfortable with and familiar with, and the digital age. It exposed them to some possibilities for their careers that perhaps they had not considered. Sean was somebody they still come back to and talk about. The video you guys put together was something really great.	There are many excellent projects students have done that have made an impression on the youth.

(5) creating meaning units from the significant statements (Table 2); (6) eliminating repetitive and overlapping meaning units; (7) categorizing meaning units into clusters of meaning (themes); and (8) testing themes against the entirety of data (validated by the full text of transcripts). The reliability of themes was assessed with two peer readers familiar with the methods and topic.

The clusters of meaning resulted in the five essential themes. Table 3 contains an example of a theme cluster that emerged from their meaning units. The validated themes were used to write a textural description or “what” the participants experienced. Additionally, the themes were used to write a structural description of the setting and context – also referred to as the “how” participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). From the integration of the textural and structural descriptions, a composite description of the essence of the phenomena was constructed, synthesizing the common

**Table 3.** Example of a cluster and associated meaning units

- Effects of student work continues beyond the semester
- Worth it even if more do not come
- Worth it even if only one or two youth benefit
- The work they did lives on beyond their time here
- People still talk about projects they did
- It is our responsibility to keep the projects going when they leave
- We miss them when they leave
- I stay in touch with some of the students
- Need a permanent space for students so they will return
- Hope they come back

experiences of the group as a whole (Table 4). Social construction provided a wider frame for this analysis and is well suited for phenomenological research (Grbich, 2007). Humans are constructing



**Table 4.** Synthesis of Community Partners' Experience

Community members who worked with students felt they were generally well received and welcomed in the town. Residence to the students, their projects, and university presence were attributed to a variety of causes including local power struggles, fear of change and unknown, and lack of awareness of the students and projects. Overall, they felt students were well liked and the projects were valuable and appreciated by the community, particularly the youth. They described numerous ways they had learned from students including how to be an advocate of positive change, new skills such as technology, art activities, new pedagogy, African history, seeing the town more positively, and exposing youth to new horizons and the possibility of higher education. Students were a source of inspiration to try new things, to believe positive change is possible, to be creative, and to overcome roadblocks and inspire youth to attend college. As they became more involved with the students they also worked hard to engage others in the projects. Though students left after a semester or the summer, they felt the work lived on, and they missed them and hoped more students would come in the future.

meaning through interaction and experiences with their environment, inclusive of a historic and social perspective (Crotty, 1998). Constructionist research assumes subjectivity and that reality is not fixed, rather it is always in flux and experienced differently depending on the person and their perception (Grbich, 2007). Recognition and insight into the meaning making of the community participants contributes valuable knowledge for building effective service-learning practices and pedagogy.

## Results

Five essential themes emerged from the interviews: (1) encouraging community involvement; (2) students as inspiration; (3) community learning; (4) community response to students; and (5) lasting imprint of students in the community.

### *Theme 1: Encouraging Community Involvement*

As a result of working with the students on specific projects, community partners increased their involvement in the town's revitalization and attempted to enlist others to do so as well. They discussed determination to overcome obstacles and use their social capital to ensure projects were successful. Participants in the study remarked on how their relationships with students had engaged them and others in the

community; however, they expressed a desire to "see more residents involved in the community." They also described how the demands of their lives at times prevented them from working with the students, for example, one said: "Due to health reasons I have been kind of out of touch. I am not in contact with what's in the now. I want to catch up on things." One community member spoke of his conflicting obligations and yet he still made time to work with students, saying:

[I haven't] been able to go as much as I would like to due to work and activities. I have put as much as I can; I stop by and support and try to get people to go out and support what is going on. (Bill, pastor and city council member)

For some community partners, their involvement increased their determination to overcome obstacles,

After two years, I am the one looking for the different ways to make things work... I don't want them [students] to hit a roadblock now and I am the one trying to get them around the corner. (Jim, school superintendent)

The community partners recognized the value of relationships in encouraging community involvement, particularly in a small town, as one noted by saying: "They have done a really good job of working and interacting with people. That's not easy. There is a natural distrust that's overcome now, I really believe that." The local newspaper editor spoke of using her position and platform to publicize the students and projects, saying, "I always promote them and help them. I am very positive as to what they are doing for us."

### *Theme 2: Students as Inspiration*

Community partners felt students inspired them to become more civically active, try new things, awaken the possibility of higher education for youth, believe in positive change, generate new energy and ideas, meet new people, and be more proactive. Community partners in the study described a newfound optimism for positive change. According to a community partner: "I see that we have something to build on; they [students] have shown us ways we can improve

and how we can get things to happen for the city.” One community partner spoke of how the students helped her recognize the potential of maximizing existing social capital, saying: “If you want [things to get better], there are plenty of people here that can make it better. I think the students and the whole program shows [the community] that.”

One resident spoke of how the students inspired her to “get out of her rut” and try new things:

If they never came I probably would never have gotten into this stuff here. I would just see myself coming home and cooking and just looking at TV. Makes you get up and go, constantly keeping you going...whereas when they came I enjoyed getting out because there were new people and I got to learn different things. (Sara, stay at home parent)

A community member described her renewed commitment to the community:

I couldn't believe it myself because I am the change; these people have inspired [me] to where I know I am the change. There was a time I felt like I needed to get the hell away from here, married or not, because there was nothing here, dead, nothing here. But seeing the students come in with different ideas and listening to students here [in the town], seeing the smiles on their faces, changed my mind, saying you need to stay and do what you can. (Iris, community advocate)

Students working in the town inspired fresh ideas and new approaches. A community partner from the school district spoke of the “new perspectives” that students brought and the “propensity to be stagnant when you don't have people from the outside come in and provide some input. Yeah, I think it stirred my thoughts.” All of the participants in the study spoke of how the university students inspired youth in the community to consider higher education as well as expose them to a world beyond the town. The high school principal described the university students as “a very positive impact to our students to say, no you can do it, you can go on to college.”

The local newspaper editor articulated her

decision to involve her work more directly with the students:

I [began to] think that my energy and my thinking could actually make a difference of changing something, trying to revive the chamber and do some projects, get some younger people into town. A lot of my deciding that it was possible to do has to do with my meeting the students and seeing they are interested in helping the [town]. (Carrie, local newspaper editor)

### *Theme 3: Community Learning*

Community partners in the study described a number of ways they learned and grew as a result of working with the university students including meeting new people, becoming a better community advocate, youth learning about life outside of the town and the possibilities for college, technology, art activities, and teaching techniques. For example:

I grew from it. How I grew was getting to be around different types of people and get well versed in what they do, and just pick up on things. I have learned by looking and listen and seeing what's going on. (Bill, pastor and City Council member)

For older community partners there was an opportunity to learn as well: “Even at my age I learned some things...experience I had was great.” Another active citizen spoke about becoming “more patient” at City Council meetings “because these things didn't come about overnight, and they are not going to go away overnight, so I have learned patience.” A school district official noted: “I have learned a lot from the resilience of these students who come here.” School district staff and residents spoke repeatedly about the learning benefits of youth in town, specifically about working side by side with university students and visiting the campus. They all felt that the relationships they formed, participating in projects, and having local high school students visit the university campus exposed the youth in town to the possibility of attending college, and “allowed students to be on a university campus that otherwise wouldn't have gotten the opportunity.” Another area of learning

that was attributed to the university students was knowledge about technology, particularly for school district staff, for example:

I am just now embracing technology in education for the classroom. To also realize that it is here to stay, and that we might as well now set up Facebook for high school is from listening to [the university student] and just knowing that it's here to stay. He helped me get rid of some of my fears of technologies. (Lori, high school principal)

A high school teacher described his professional development as a result of working with the university students:

When you are a school teacher you spend so much of your time within these four walls ... it was neat to get out and see what's happening beyond here, some of the new trends, particularly talking with [the university student] about the digital revolution and media. ... I was really impressed with the energy that the university students brought to the town. The whole concept of the blog ... . I know on our campus we have a couple of teachers who are incorporating blogging into the curriculum. (Brad, high school teacher)

Increased civic mindedness was not only for the adults in the community. As one said, "It's given them [youth] outlets for their creativity and their particular skills and they are thinking in terms of public service and higher education, when perhaps before they might not have." Another teacher who worked with a university graduate student in her classroom over the course of an academic year spoke of her professional growth: "If nothing else, it gave me a few more tools in my arsenal to teach. It was really good."

#### *Theme 4: Community Response to the Students*

When asked about the community's response to the students, participants in this study described a mostly welcoming and favorable reception; however, an element of resistance was also identified. This resistance was explained differently depending on the community partner. The explanations ranged from power struggles, lack of awareness of the students and projects,

and general mistrust of outsiders and change. The participants in this study expressed appreciation and a hope that students will continue to come to the town, and felt most of the community was in agreement. According to one, "I think they were received by most that I know with an open heart, open head, gracious and friendly."

A member of the City Council spoke of those in power feeling their position compromised by the students' presence and infusion of new ideas:

It shifts the balance all the way around. Everything should be on an even keel, but some people don't see it that way. They felt like we allowed these people to come in and make things better and then others will be able to progress; then they will lose power. It's a power struggle type thing, and it's an ego type thing. (Bill, pastor and City Council member)

Resistance was expressed in a number of ways. For example, a school district employee talked of anticipating resistance from certain sectors in the community when he was first approached about the prospect of service-learning projects and a new university presence in town, saying, "I knew they [people with power] would be apprehensive and unhelpful. I think they were and they still are, and the people that I thought would be open and ready for some change and hope were." Despite what one community partner described as "naysayers," the resistance to new ideas was something participants in this study saw being chipped away over time as trust was built. When asked what made the partnership and projects successful, one participant replied, "I would have to say trust." Another community partner felt a permanent space would address resistance and increase involvement:

The one failure that we have had, and there is nothing we can do about it, I talked about this from the onset ... I wanted a permanent home, a permanent base for this project downtown, so that when new students came, it ... didn't matter... . If [certain] people could see some type of permanence, I think the people who are skeptical would be less so. (Jim, school superintendent)

Overall, there was a deep sense of gratitude



expressed by the community partners in this study for the commitment and contribution of the university students:

I haven't seen anything really negative. It's gotten people thinking, maybe even ideas that didn't take hold, ideas that were mentioned at a city council meeting or chamber of commerce meeting I thought was wonderful that people from outside were actually giving us ideas that could actually be implemented here. (Brad, high school teacher)

A retired teacher who was active in several projects described her experience with the students, saying: "The students were there and we had a good time. They were up at the school working with the kids. We think that that was a wonderful thing."

#### *Theme 5: Lasting Imprint of Students in the Community*

Participants spoke of student projects having a "lasting effect" that continues to live on. They also discussed the need for community members to "carry on, keep up the work" and "get enough people to fill in the gap" to ensure continuity after the semester concluded. There was a strong belief that "If you can reach a few people, it's worth the time," particularly when it came to the youth. The school superintendent spoke of the long lasting impact the university students had made on the school district students:

You know they are going to leave so it's not a shock, but you don't really leave when you leave the impression. You stay infinitely and you put thoughts in the minds of kids, things they would not have been exposed to. I think that you leave a little bit of a legacy when you reach a kid. (Jim, School Superintendent)

When high school students visited the university campus, school district staff and other community partners in the study spoke of the imprint it made on those who participated, for example:

They went to the campus and that made [for] a memorable experience to them. If we impact one it's a success. Just that there is world outside the town – not that it is bad, but to really

be a productive citizen, viable citizen, you have to broaden your horizons and experiences and that's one of the avenues this program has offered kids that would not have the opportunity. That's the essence of it. (Lori, high school principal)

A social support group started by university students for high school youth was a program frequently mentioned in these interviews as a successful program. Examples: "Students are still asking me today that were part of that group if they were ever going to start it back up." "I have seen a smile on their faces [when they] talk about how their participation was [in the group]." "I would love to see that [social support] program continue, that really made an impression...it really made an impact."

Youth frequently asked the community partners, particularly school district staff who interacted with university students, if the students would be back. They were told: "I just say next year is next year and there are budget issues we are dealing with them, and I said I can't make any guarantees. There was a void though, knowing that it's gone." A high school teacher who worked with one university student over the course of the academic year spoke of having to explain to her students why university students would not return:

I do know that the students would [ask] when is she coming back, and I would say she's not coming and they would say "What? Why not?" and wanted to know why she wasn't coming back because she had become a part of them. (Susan, high school teacher)

The participants in the study spoke of a sense of loss they felt when the students left: "I miss them terribly when they go on and look forward to them being here every year. I will be extremely sad if you decide not to come." Community partners expressed hope that a designated space for students would ensure their return: "I would love to see us use that space somehow to have you guys come in all the time." Another community partner who worked on a variety of projects reflected on his experience with the students:

It's just been a good journey. It could

have been better, wish it would have been, with more support from people that have authority and able to financially help. All together it's been good; I would do it all again. If we started from scratch I would be right there on board. No matter that it's a cliché, an old psalm they used to sing, "Ain't no stopping us now." (Bill, pastor and City Council member)

## Discussion

A core principle of service learning is the establishment of reciprocal relationships that result in mutually beneficial outcomes for both communities and students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Research on service learning has primarily focused on student outcomes with very few studies examining the community's experience (Cress et al., 2010). The relatively few studies to date are informed by agency staff and have not explored the involvement of informal networks or individuals who are active in their community; therefore, this study engaged a wide range of community partners, school staff, civic organizations, agencies, and civically involved residents.

While previous studies that include community partners focused on their perception of the effect of service-learning students on their organization, clients, and the students themselves (Driscoll et al., 1996), agency satisfaction with students and ways to improve the partnerships (Gray et al., 1998; Littlepage et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006), this study was concerned with the community partner's lived experience and the meaning of having university students involved in their community. Findings from the current study suggest that communities partnering with service-learning students receive a range of potential benefits including increased civic participation, the opportunity to gain knowledge, inspiration to try new things, an infusion of fresh ideas and energy, and experience a lasting positive effect beyond the students' time in the community.

The study's results are limited to nine participants who were very involved in the partnership; however, there were many other residents who engaged with the students over the course of the three years. Restrictions of time and resources prevented increasing the number of participants, a second round of interviews, or

focus groups. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample of involved community partners, and a longitudinal study to track the long-term impact of service learning and community-university partnerships.

The community in which this study took place is a small, rural town that has experienced a severe economic decline that has taken its toll on both the quality of life and infrastructure. Many residents lament the passing of a more prosperous time when the town was a thriving railroad and agricultural hub, and the condition of the infrastructure was attractive. Power, class, and racial divides run deep throughout generations, and often include a distrust of outsiders and their motives. The distrust expressed by some residents when we began this partnership has been discussed in the literature that indicates the benefits of service learning are focused more on the best interests of students and the university over the community (Ringstad, Leyva, Garcia, & Jasek-Rysdahl, 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker, Loving, Reddy, & Bollig, 2010). The arrival of the first cohort of university students was met with mixed reactions from a warm welcome and a feeling that help was on the way to skepticism and worry about broken promises. Over the course of two years, relationships were built and trust evolved. While participants acknowledged challenges such as the time limitations of the semester, the difficulties of enlisting community participation, and a void once students left, they felt the benefits outweighed the shortcomings.

Community members in the study increased their involvement as a result of working with students and made efforts to engage others in projects they worked on with students. One of the reasons they felt the projects and students were successful in engaging the community was the relationships students built with them and other residents. These relationships developed over time and eventually helped to minimize distrust and skepticism toward the students and the motives of university involvement. Participants in the study leveraged their position and social capital to encourage other residents to work on projects with the students. While students made consistent efforts to publicize projects and invite community participation, the community partners felt they were in a stronger position to convince neighbors, friends, and colleagues to get involved.

Students working in the community inspired

participants to “get out of a rut” to try new things and meet new people. As a result, community partners forged new relationships and became more optimistic about the possibility of positive change. They saw themselves building on the energy and commitment of the students, and “becoming the change.” The intention of service learning is not to do *for* but to do *with*. Through collaboration with the students, community partners began to see themselves as the ultimate change agents whose bore responsibility for carrying on the work. Participants in the study were most impressed with how the university students exposed youth in the town to the possibility of attending college and venturing beyond the rural town through project activities, including visits to the campus.

While research has demonstrated a variety of ways students grow and learn as a result of participation in service-learning experiences (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Finley, 2012), the current study suggests non-student participants increase knowledge and personal growth as a result of engagement with university service-learning programs. For some it was overcoming a fear of technology and learning new skills they applied in their professional and personal life. Teachers discussed new pedagogical methods modeled by the university students that they later employed in their classrooms, such as blogging, communication exercises, and technology. In addition to learning new skills and techniques, participants spoke of improving their ability to advocate through their work with the students, particularly by developing more patience and resilience.

While the participants in this study expressed appreciation for the university students, and generally felt the town’s reception to them was welcoming, they spoke of a resistance toward the students by certain members of the community. Resistance was attributed to fear of the unknown, lack of awareness, long-standing power disputes, and small town mistrust of outsiders. There was a degree of anger and frustration when the participants spoke of the resistance; however, it was not unexpected or something they had not encountered before in other civic or professional efforts. Despite the resistance, participants overall felt the town welcomed the students and valued the projects’ contributions, particularly for the youth.

One of the challenges of service learning is the eventual departure of students when a semester concludes; however, the duration of a relationship is not always the indication of its value (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Participants in the study responded to questions about the semester timeframe and the number of students coming and going, specifically if it was worth them being there even though they would leave at some point. While they recognized the drawbacks of forming attachments with students and the possibility that much needed programs may not continue, participants felt the work and presence of the students lived on in a positive way. For participants in this study the value of working with university students transcended a particular set of outcomes; rather they spoke of an imprint that could positively shape one’s life or even the direction of the town. Participant comments also speak to several related criticisms of the artificial timeframe of the semester, including insufficient time to engage with community partners, lack of ability to transfer knowledge (Tyron, Stoecker, Martin, Seblonka, Hilgendorf, & Nellis, 2008), trails of unfulfilled promises, and a sense of abandonment in the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Stoecker, Loving, Reddy, & Bollig, 2010). This study suggests that community members felt engaged with the students, having learned enough from the experience to go forward, realized a sense of completion, and with an understanding of the fitness of the students’ departure.

## Conclusion

The current study supports the value service learning offers communities and underscores the importance of investing in relationships with community partners. Additionally, the study also elucidates the potential value added of including community partners who are members of informal networks and civically active residents to service-learning experiences and research. Further research is needed to build a useful understanding of the lived experience of community participants in service-learning projects, and might include focus groups, arts-based methods and multimedia documentation, and longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effect of this type of community-university partnership. Qualitative research methods that utilize a variety of data points, including personal and archival documents, allow for in depth

investigation that captures nuance and provides social, cultural, and historic context. This is especially important in working with diverse populations that have been marginalized and overlooked.

The study supports the importance of relationship building with a range of community partners and paves the way for future research that delves into the meaning and impact of relationships between students and their community partners and the potential for sustainable civic engagement despite the inevitable departure of students at the end of the semester. Additionally, the findings make a case for long-term investment in the time consuming activities required to develop reciprocal and authentic partnerships. Such understandings will assist in the development and support of best practices for engaging the community in service learning programs and address gaps in research about community partners.

The results of this study suggest that the community gained direct benefits when students engaged informally with individual community members in addition to the formal institutional/agency based engagement. Those benefits included increased civic participation, gaining new knowledge and skills, inspiration to try new things, new ideas and energy, and recognizing a positive effect beyond the students' time in the community. Additionally, this study can inform service-learning pedagogy by encouraging faculty to dedicate sufficient time to exploring the pitfalls as well as advantages of working in communities. This implies not focusing solely on project outcomes or learning objectives, but rather on how the value community members place on getting to know students and the inspiration and impetus they provide can last after the semester is over. Recommendations for increasing the benefits of service learning for community-university relationships include the intentional provision of opportunities for informal relationships between community members and students, as well as recognition of the meaning making of community partners as an important project resource.

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University and high school students are shown here working on a variety of mapping projects in an art and design class. The high school students traveled to the university and the university students traveled to the town (an hour and a half away) several times over the semester to work on joint projects.